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SUBJECT: PHILIPPINES SHIFT TROOP MIX IN SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES TO RAMP UP HUNT FOR TERRORISTS

Classified By: Charge Paul W. Jones, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: The Philippine government has completed reconfiguring its troop mix in the southern Philippines, with the Philippine Marines replacing the Army as the dominant force on Jolo island, where key Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah terrorists are suspected to be hiding. The new "Fleet Marine" concept will give the Philippine Navy and Marines responsibility for the Sulu Archipelago of small islands, with the Army responsible for Central Mindanao. Marine Brigadier General Juancho Sabban, who over the last five years has largely pacified nearby Basilan island, took command of the Jolo forces earlier this year. The government hopes Sabban's leadership will increase the chances of locating and capturing terrorists, while critics worry the change may lead to violence based on the Philippines Marines' history of aggressive pursuit. The repositioning of Philippine military forces may provide greater security for the U.S. forces participating in civil-military operations in the southern Philippines, which is a top Philippine priority. At the same time, the troop shifts and Esperon's focused efforts to implement the associated command changes before he retires on May 9 are another indication of President Arroyo's seriousness about pressing the pursuit of high-value terrorists in the southern Philippines. END SUMMARY.

THE FLEET MARINE CONCEPT TAKES HOLD

¶12. (C) The Armed Forces of the Philippines has completed repositioning Philippine Marine and Army forces in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago as part of a broader Fleet Marine concept that the Philippine military is implementing in the southern Philippines. Under this concept, the Philippine Navy and Marine Corps will have primary responsibility for defeating terrorist groups in the Sulu Archipelago, while the Philippine Army now takes the lead on providing security to Central Mindanao. With the redeployment of forces complete, one Marine brigade remains on Basilan, supported by companies of local militia, whereas on Jolo island, Philippine forces now consist of five Marine battalions, along with three Philippine Army units. Philippine Marine Brigadier Juancho Sabban, who recently took command of the newly designated Jolo Internal Defense Force, plans to further integrate law enforcement and military efforts to bring stability to Jolo. Sabban, an outspoken commander comfortable with the media, is largely credited with pacifying Basilan over the last five years through a combination of disciplined, targeted military offensives coupled with a strong emphasis on civil-military projects, all with U.S. assistance.

COMPLICATING FACTORS

13. (C) One complicating factor in giving the Philippine Marines the lead on Jolo is that the Marines have not expressed interest in including former Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) fighters in their units. In accord with the 1996 peace agreement with the MNLF, over 5,000 former MNLF fighters were inducted into the Philippine Army with the proviso that they would serve in their home region. Former MNLF fighters have integrated successfully in Philippine Army units on Jolo, and it appears the Army will continue to have responsibility for any integratee units operating in the Sulu Archipelago.

14. (C) The Marines also must counter the public's perception that they are more aggressive and concerned only with capturing high-value targets, not with the welfare of the local population. Some of this criticism stems from the different culture between Philippine Marine and Army units. While the Army often recruit locally and its troops spend much time or all of their careers serving in their native province, the Marines are deployed as a unit to combat area and do not bring their families on changes of station. Consequently, Marines often are viewed by local residents as outsiders, unfamiliar with local customs. On Jolo island, for example, the majority of the population are Tausugs, a tight-knit ethnic group to which many of the high-value terrorists of the Abu Sayyaf Group belong, and among whom they have often found safe haven. Despite initial concerns that local residents might react to the Marines in a way that led to confrontation, such violence has not materialized.

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Public officials on Jolo appear to be supportive of the Marines. Expressing his confidence in Sabban, Sulu Governor Sakur Tan said in an interview, "We are confident the Marines will do their best to make the residents and the province safe for our tourism and economic programs."

EFFECT ON U.S. TROOPS' SECURITY

15. (C) The realignment of Philippine military forces within the Sulu Archipelago and Mindanao may provide greater security for U.S. forces participating in civil-military operations in the southern Philippines, particularly on Jolo. The Marines and police on Jolo are working together to project security throughout the island, which will undermine insurgents' efforts to disrupt humanitarian activities. In multiple meetings with the Philippine Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Hermogenes Esperon, the Ambassador has emphasized the importance of force protection for U.S. troops providing counterterrorism assistance to the Philippine forces. Esperon repeatedly has pledged his commitment that security of U.S. forces was one of his top priorities.

COMMENT

16. (C) The implementation of the Fleet Marine concept by the Philippine Armed Forces was planned for some time and was not a reaction to any recent event. While the Philippine Army's 104th Brigade on Jolo scored significant successes over the last eight years, most notably in the killing of SuperFerry bomber Abu Solaiman and of Abu Sayyaf leaders involved in the kidnapping of tourists from a Malaysian resort in 2000, the unit suffered its share of setbacks with dozens of troops and officers killed in battles against terrorists. Some recent offensives against high-value targets and rogue MNLF commanders on Jolo have failed due to intelligence leaks and poor communications among the Philippine troops. Despite the

Philippine Marines' reputation as "bounty hunters" because of their past successes in counterterrorism operations, the Mission believes that the combination of a Marine-led force and the leadership of Brigadier General Juancho Sabban will give the Philippine forces a leg up in their very challenging combat operations on Jolo and in the effort to capture remaining high-value targets. The challenge will be convincing the media and Arroyo administration critics that the military can maintain a balance between hard and soft power, the approach that proved successful in bringing greater security to Basilan over the past five years.

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